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HEADLINE: Ford jottings offer something new for JFK conspiracy theorists

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Thirty-three years ago, Gerald R. Ford took pen in hand and changed ever so slightly the Warren Commission's key sentence on the place where a bullet entered John F. Kennedy's body when he was killed in Dallas.

The effect of Ford's change was to strengthen the commission's conclusion that a single bullet passed through Kennedy and severely wounded Texas Gov. John Connally a crucial element in its finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole gunman.

A small change, said Ford on Wednesday when it came to light, one intended to clarify meaning, not alter history.

He was a Republican leader in Congress at the time who became president when Richard Nixon resigned in 1974. He is the sole surviving member of the commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren.

"My changes had nothing to do with a conspiracy theory," he said in a telephone interview from Beaver Creek, Colo. "My changes were only an attempt to be more precise."

But still, his editing was seized upon by members of the conspiracy community, which rejects the commission's conclusion that Oswald acted alone.

"This is the most significant lie in the whole Warren Commission report," said Robert D. Morningstar, a computer systems specialist in New York City who said he has studied the assassination since it occurred and written an Internet book about it.

The effect of Ford's editing, Morningstar said, was to suggest that a bullet struck Kennedy in the neck, "raising the wound two or three inches. Without that alteration, they could never have hoodwinked the public as to the true number of assassins."

The Warren Commission concluded in 1964 that a single bullet _ fired by a "discontented" Oswald passed through Kennedy's body and wounded his fellow motorcade passenger, Connally, and that a second, fatal bullet, fired from the same place, tore through Kennedy's head.

The assassination of the president occurred Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas; Oswald was arrested that day but was shot and killed two days later as he was being transferred from the city jail to the county jail.

Conspiracy theorists reject the idea that a single bullet could have hit both Kennedy and Connally and done such damage. Thus they argue that a second gunman must have been involved.

Ford's changes tend to support the single-bullet theory by making a specific point that the bullet entered Kennedy's body "at the back of his neck" rather than in his uppermost back, as the commission staff originally wrote.

Ford's handwritten notes were contained in 40,000 pages of records kept by J. Lee Rankin, chief counsel of the Warren Commission.

They were made public Wednesday by the Assassination Record Review Board, an agency created by Congress to amass all relevant evidence in the case. The documents will be available to the public in the National Archives.

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The staff of the commission had written: "A bullet had entered his back at a point slightly above the shoulder and to the right of the spine."

Ford suggested changing that to read: "A bullet had entered the back of his neck at a point slightly to the right of the spine."

The final report said: "A bullet had entered the base of the back of his neck slightly to the right of the spine."

In the interview, he recalled making the change, but said that clarity, not conspiracy, was the purpose.

He said he supposed the commission's overriding conclusion -- that Oswald acted alone would always be challenged, but "I think our judgments have stood the test of time."

James Laser, a lawyer who runs the Assassination Archive Research Center, the largest non-governmental collection of materials on the assassination, said that both Ford's description and the commission staff's were in conflict with the Kennedy death certificate "which said the bullet entered in the upper back region, well below the neck."

But lawyer Gerald Posner, author of "Case Closed," a 1993 book that accepts the Warren conclusions, said the death certificate was based on erroneous drawings by the doctors who autopsied Kennedy.

"Only Warren saw the autopsy pictures and X-rays," Posner said. "He deemed them so horrendous he did not pass them around, even to other members of the commission. Those photos show the autopsy doctors got it wrong. The entry was in the high upper neck, higher than where the doctors mark it on their drawings, which the death certificate was based on."